

THE STUDY OF MAN

THADDEUS STEVENS: AN AMERICAN RADICAL

Architect of the Reconstruction

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AMERICANS like to classify their politicians under simple labels that seem to explain completely their motivation and their philosophy. A man is put down in the books as a liberal, a conservative, or a radical: he represented the people or the interests; he was on the side of the angels or of the forces of evil. Just get the label affixed, the idea seems to be, and you understand the individual. Actually, the nature of our political system is so complex that no facile polarism can be imposed on either American political life or American history—especially when, as is often the case, the polarism is really drawn from European political life. For example, it is widely assumed (one encounters the statement constantly) that since Reconstruction the planters of the South, more than any other

class in the region, have opposed enlarged rights for Negroes. The apparent basis for this assumption is that the planters, being members of a propertied minority, were conservatives and hence must have been against measures to benefit a laboring group of another color. But the truth is that the planters were more disposed—for economic and political reasons—to grant concessions to the Negroes than were the white masses. The strongest and bitterest opposition to the Negro came from the "common whites." Almost every upsurge of white democracy in the South, from Tillman to Talmadge, has been accompanied by race-baiting and some attempted repression of the colored minority.

Other examples of the impossibility of explaining American politics according to a tidy, nicely wrapped-up schematicism can be chosen at random from our history. What about the protesting farmers of the 1880's and 1890's? Usually depicted as the heralds of Progressivism, were they not, in attempting to turn back the clock to an older and simpler agrarian economy, really conservatives? And if agents of great change are radicals, were not the big business tycoons, who were remaking America while being denounced by the agrarians, radicals? And was not the first Progressive program (1900-1912), usually considered to be the first ray of liberalism in recent American history, enacted under the auspices of the Republican party, usually considered to be the protector of plutocracy? Probably the most confusing difficulty encountered by practitioners of the easy classification is in evaluating the personalities and significance of that type of politician in our national life represented by men like Benjamin F. Butler, Thaddeus Stev-

ELSEWHERE in this issue C. Vann Woodward, writing about today's desegregation movement from the perspective of Southern history, calls it the "New Reconstruction." In this portrait of Thaddeus Stevens, who was the architect and moving spirit of the Old Reconstruction, T. HARRY WILLIAMS takes issue with Ralph Korngold's conception of that arresting figure (*Thaddeus Stevens*, Harcourt, Brace, 460 pp., \$6.00) in an attempt to provide a realistic appraisal of the man who led the Republican Radicals in Congress during Lincoln's and Johnson's administrations. A noted historian and the author of *Lincoln and the Radicals*, *Lincoln and His Generals*, as well as a biography of the Confederate general P. G. T. Beauregard, Mr. Williams occupies the Boyd Chair in History at Louisiana State University. He last appeared in COMMENTARY with an account of the principal schools of interpretation of the Civil War (August 1954).

ens, and perhaps, in our own time, Senator McCarthy. The politicians of this model have usually been arch-conservatives, but on occasion they have been capable of bursting forth with liberal or even radical ideas. In their combined contradictions they represent, in varying degree with each individual, the best and the worst elements in our political tradition, and they defy polarism.

Perhaps the best example of the genus is Thaddeus Stevens, the grim master of the Republican machine during the Reconstruction period, who is currently enjoying a historical revival. Here is a man who simultaneously served the interests of business by plugging for a high tariff and enraged the bankers by advocating a fiat paper currency, who opposed slavery and fought for Negro rights, but played along with the Know-Nothings who wanted to deny rights to aliens. The Stevens story suggests that American politics and politicians cannot be fitted into any familiar or rigid pattern.

THE spirit of Thaddeus Stevens in whatever afterworld it resides—the hell to which Southerners of the Civil War and Reconstruction period consigned him, or the heaven for which his Northern Republican admirers were certain he was destined—must be amused as he contemplates the efforts of historians and biographers to assign him a neat, definite niche in history, and as he watches their shifting attitudes on what that place should be. For long years he has been labeled in the history books as a nasty villain, and now he seems on the point of emerging as a saint. One can almost hear the ghostly sardonic laughter of the old man, who in life was always conscious of human inconsistencies and always cynical of the motives that determine the opinions of men.

The Stevens story is a fascinating case history of what may happen to a man's reputation when the historians get to working him over. In many respects his career is a typical American success tale. Born in 1792 in Vermont of farm parents of very moderate circumstances, he secured a college education, taught school, and read for the law. Admitted to the bar, he began his legal practice in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and shortly became one of the best, and one of the most sought after, lawyers in the state. Eventually he entered into various business enterprises, including the ownership of

an iron manufactory, and became also a man of solid economic substance. It was inevitable that he should go into politics. Most ambitious young men of that period did. And with him there was another impelling factor. Politics seems to have been in his blood; his normal environment was the legislative hall. If there be such a person as a natural professional politician, he was one.

Stevens won election to the Pennsylvania legislature as a candidate of the Anti-Masonic party, that organization which arose briefly to power in some states as the enemy of secret societies. After the Anti-Masonic movement flickered out, he joined the Whigs, the party of the conservative business classes. In his legislative career, he usually followed the normal Whig line, introducing and championing measures designed to benefit the corporate interests. But sometimes he got out of line. A notable example was his stand on the public school issue. In the 1820's and 1830's the public school advocates were striving in state after state to secure acceptance of the principle that the community had an obligation to maintain schools for its children. A law authorizing the expenditure of tax monies for schools hung in the balance in Pennsylvania. By a remarkable display of oratory and political pressure Stevens drove it through to passage. Not all men of property wanted to be taxed to educate other people's children.

As a legislator, Stevens demonstrated a superb talent for organizing and managing his party, which, whether a majority or a minority, followed wherever he led. He developed terrible skills in debate, specializing in sarcastic sallies and slashing jibes that either collapsed an opponent or left him too angry to reply effectively. In the records of Stevens's speeches in the legislature and later in the accounts of his remarks in Congress, the word most frequently inserted in parentheses by the stenographic reporter is "laughter." All of the techniques that made him a great legislative leader and boss he had formulated and tested on the state level before he entered national politics.

In 1848 he was elected to the House of Representatives, running as a Whig with support from the American, or Know-Nothing, party, the first nativist organization in American politics. Defeated for re-election in 1852, he returned to the practice of law and the pursuit of wealth. When the Whig party fell to pieces on the slavery issue, Stevens joined

the new Republican party, that aggregation of factions that represented the idealism of the anti-slavery movement and the economic aspirations of Northern capitalism. Stevens was a perfect embodiment of Republican doctrine. He was anti-slavery and pro-high tariff, and no historian can say with finality which of the two principles was dearest to his heart. But how could he have been for a tariff without also opposing slavery? The power that prevented industry from securing a tariff was the slave-holding South. Stevens's combination of interest and idealism was, under the circumstances, a natural one for him to make, and other Northern politicians negotiated similar adjustments. As a Republican, he won back his House seat in 1858, and held it with practically no opposition until his death in 1868.

UNTIL the Civil War began, Stevens's reputation was largely local, but with the advent of war he suddenly emerged as a national figure. By exercising his talents as an organizer and debater, he became the leader of the Republican machine in the House, holding the immensely powerful chairmanship of the Committee on Ways and Means, and commanding a dominant influence in the caucus of the Congressional Republicans. As the "dictator of the House," he squared off almost immediately in a battle with President Lincoln that lasted for the remainder of the war. The conflict was no mere contest between clashing personalities, but a struggle between Stevens and Lincoln as leaders of opposing factions in the Republican party, with Stevens heading the group known as the Radicals and the President the one called the Conservatives.

The great issue that divided the two factions was slavery. On most questions, including economic matters, they were in fundamental agreement: both favored legislation to benefit Northern industry and agriculture. They differed, and violently, on the disposition of slavery to be made as a result of the war. The Radicals wanted to seize the opportunity of the war to strike the institution down—suddenly and finally. The Conservatives, who were also anti-slavery, wanted to accomplish the same result in a different way—easily and gradually. They were perhaps temperamentally opposed to abrupt change, and they were extremely conscious of the effects that might follow a wrenching change in race relations. They urged, therefore, a program of gradual emanci-

pation to be accomplished over a period of years. In short, the Radicals were determined to make the abolition of slavery an objective of the war; they would restore the Union without slavery. The Conservatives hoped to avoid turning the war into an experiment in social change; they preferred to restore the Union with slavery—but with a plan worked out for its ultimate extirpation.

In the bitter struggle between the two factions, the Radicals won out. Time and the logic of the situation were on their side. If, as most people believed, slavery was the primary cause of the war, why should the Northern people fight and sacrifice to preserve an institution that had brought on the war? The longer the war continued the more certain Northern opinion was to demand the end of slavery. And finally the North did demand that abolition be made an objective of the war, and Lincoln, the supreme political realist, accepted the will of the majority. The Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment registered the victory of the Radicals. Thus the destruction of slavery as a result of the war was the policy of Thaddeus Stevens, and not of Abraham Lincoln.

From the struggle with Lincoln, Stevens moved into a fight with another President, Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson. Here the issue was Reconstruction—the terms on which the seceded Southern states would be permitted to return to the Union, the degree of punishment to be meted out to the South, the lengths to which the national government should go in fixing the civil and political position of the former slaves. Without going into detail, it may be said that the Reconstruction policies of Stevens and Johnson embodied the differences between, to use modern terms, a hard peace and a soft peace. Stevens, backed by the Radicals (who constituted a decisive majority of the Republican party), demanded a punitive peace settlement. Johnson, supported by some Conservatives and the Democrats, championed a mild and forgiving adjustment; in particular, the President and his followers would have left the determination of race relations in the South largely to the Southern whites. Again Stevens defeated a President. The Reconstruction program, as it was worked out, was largely of his making. Not that he had his way in everything. No longer, as in the war years, could he always whip an obedient majority into line with his fierce barbs; on numerous

occasions younger Republicans defied his will. Not as extreme as he sometimes sounded, he probably would have preferred that the Negroes not be granted the suffrage immediately. Nevertheless, he was still the chieftain of the Republican Congressional machine, and he well deserves the title of "architect of Reconstruction."

WHAT does the Stevens record add up to? Support of public schools, encouragement of business, opposition to slavery, support of nationalism and the Union, punishment for the secession leaders who had tried to divide the nation, and advocacy of Negro rights. Now suppose that an intelligent observer from another planet who knew something of our history were to examine the story of this man. What would he conclude? Would he not think that on most issues Stevens had been on the side of the angels and had played a great and honorable role in the development of the nation? Would he not decide that in the American Valhalla Stevens must occupy a high and honored place? Pity the poor observer if he arrived at such conclusions and voiced them. He would have reckoned without the historians, and he would have to get out fast before they exposed him as a naive ignoramus who did not understand the deeper meaning of American history.

The truth (the strange truth, our imaginary observer might conclude) is that in the national historical record, and in the national historical consciousness, Stevens occupies one of the lowest places ever assigned to a political leader. The usual picture of Stevens, the one that has been presented in the textbooks to generations of students, is something like this: he was a mean and malicious man who hated Lincoln and Johnson and opposed their policies; above all, he hated Southerners, and used his vast power in Congress to fasten an unjust peace upon the prostrate South. Sometimes the sketch is varied to make Stevens a hypocrite. He did not really hate the slaveholders but only pretended to in order to break their power and thus prepare the way for the triumph of industry over agriculture—and this was bad because the industrial age brought with it glaring economic inequalities.

In the face of the record, why should Stevens's reputation be what it is? How did he acquire it? It is to these questions that Ralph Korngold addresses himself in a big and bel-

ligerent biography, *Thaddeus Stevens, A Being Darkly Wise and Rudely Great*. Mr. Korngold seems to have set himself up as a rescuer of misunderstood extremists, having previously written studies of Robespierre, Toussaint L'Ouverture, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips. Stevens has had admiring biographers before (Callender, McCall, Singmaster), but none who went as far as Mr. Korngold.

Because he himself is in spirit a 19th-century Radical, Mr. Korngold does not quite succeed in finding the answers to the Stevens riddle. He sees the issues of Stevens's time through Stevens's eyes, and he is more interested in attacking his hero's enemies than in explaining his political personality or in understanding the historical perspectives that have created his reputation. There is an important and an interesting relation between Stevens's status in history and his standing as a politician. He exercised great power, but for a brief period, and the highest office he ever held was that of Representative from a Congressional district. He was never mentioned seriously for the Presidency, and he did not even attain the Senatorial and Cabinet posts to which he always aspired.

WHY did Stevens go no higher than an office that was essentially local in nature? Just where did he fall short? A partial answer would seem to be that, while he conformed largely to the normal political pattern, in significant respects he departed from it. For one thing, he refused to adjust his private life to suit prevailing American mores. He was a bachelor, and was suspected, without much evidence, of maintaining a Negro mistress in his home; he seemed to enjoy giving the impression that the woman was his paramour. He liked to gamble, and openly frequented the most notorious halls of chance in Washington. Not content with flouting the Victorian moral standards of his time, he violated some of the most revered canons of political behavior. In a country that expected its politicians to act—at least in public—with a becoming degree of hypocritical cant and ponderous pomposity, he played the part of a sardonic humorist, a relentless puncturer of stuffed shirts, and an amused and cynical disbeliever in human righteousness. Entering the House on one occasion and being informed that a debate was in progress between "two damned rascals," he inquired

very genially, "Which is our damned rascal?"

He was, in fine, a rough, brusque, and difficult man, and definitely not a gentleman in the genteel meaning of the word. Whatever effects his personality had on his political fortunes, it has certainly helped to determine the way the historians have dealt with him. It is surprising how scholars have been influenced by the genteel tradition. Probably without being aware of its influence, they have tended to assume that the "nice" people in history have been on the right side. This attitude is partly responsible for the favorable treatment accorded General George B. McClellan in Civil War writings. McClellan was a thoroughgoing incompetent. But he was a gentleman, while his enemies, including Stevens, were not.

But Stevens disregarded the political conventions in more important areas than personal conduct. He was not "regular" in the party sense. In the salad days of his career he was a member of a third party, the Anti-Masons, and after joining the Whigs he flirted with another third party, the Know-Nothings. Although he became a leader of the Republican organization, he spent most of his legislative time and energy in opposing the titular head of his party. He seemed to consider the Republican party as the personal vehicle of Thaddeus Stevens. He belonged to a party that represented the interests of business, and for the most part he faithfully served those interests. But on occasion he could get completely off the reservation, as on the greenback issue, and voice extreme denunciations of the masters of finance and exaggerated professions of his love for the masses. Another Radical leader, Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio, sometimes indulged in the same tactics. The business backers of the party were often puzzled and dismayed by the actions of Stevens and Wade. Usually they proceeded like proper conservatives, but at intervals they performed like radical demagogues. Definitely they were not reliable custodians of property rights.

THE lone-wolf course that Stevens sometimes took in politics and the apparent contradictions in his economic views are to be explained by his experience in the Radical Republican movement. The Radicals, it needs to be emphasized, were not radical in the modern economic sense. Indeed, in that sense they were conservative, being committed to a program of legislation to foster and protect indus-

trial capitalism. They were true radicals, as they well realized, in the sense that they wanted to accomplish a significant change in American society: to destroy slavery and at the same time to strike down the political power of the slavocracy that was blocking the development of Northern free enterprise. They thought of themselves as architects of a revolution that was bringing a new class and a new social philosophy into the seats of American power.

They were genuine radicals, too, in the methods they employed to achieve their objective. They proposed to effect a great change suddenly and without much regard for the opinions of those who opposed them, and without much thought of the problems that an abrupt change might create; in describing their techniques, they like to use phrases like "remorseless and revolutionary violence." Inevitably, some of them acquired revolutionary temperaments. They became willing to use short-cuts to reach their goals, to resort to techniques that skirted around the edges of the law or of custom; they talked about the end justifying the means.

Stevens, for example, defended his Reconstruction policy by maintaining that the country was divided into two extreme camps: patriotic, pure Republicans versus unrepentant rebels and evil Democrats. (It is a weakness of Mr. Korngold's book that he seems to accept this division as being true.) Radicals like Stevens developed a kind of personal instability that often appears in revolutionary leaders: a certain lack of restraint, a tendency to break out with a new and completely individual idea, and to take off after it regardless of the effect on party discipline. This highly personal concept of party leadership characterized a number of the original Radicals. It was a fatal personal weakness, but for democratic government a fortunate one. Without it, politicians like Stevens and Ben Butler, authentic geniuses who played the political game by ear, would have been dangerous men. But the Stevens-Butler type never secure the highest offices. Somewhere along the line they stumble. Lincoln took their measure. Somebody told him that Butler was the material of which dictators were made. Lincoln said that Butler reminded him of Jim Jett's brother: Jim always said his brother was the damndest scoundrel in the world but in the infinite mercy of Providence he was also the damndest fool.

MR. KORNGOLD is right when he says that the Radicals have not received their fair due from the historians. In the years between 1920 and 1940 American historical writing was dominated by a number of concepts that were the product of the social and intellectual forces of those decades. Most historians active in that period had what may be termed a liberal, agrarian, anti-nationalist philosophy of history. They saw great values in the agricultural culture that flourished before the Civil War and great evils in the industrial society that came into being as a result of the war. They thought that the Republicans should have averted the war by compromise, and they doubted if the Union was worth preserving by force. Influenced by the aftermath of World War I, they believed that the victor should be magnanimous to the defeated; they stigmatized Reconstruction as one of the blackest episodes in our history. As the Radicals were the architects of the changes which they deplored, the historians consigned them to outer darkness. Occupying the most prominent place in their scholarly limbo was Thaddeus Stevens.

During the decade since the close of World War II, a reappraisal of the American past, particularly of the Civil War and Reconstruction period, has taken place. Partly a reflection of the recent trend toward conservatism in American thought, this process has challenged many of the conclusions reached by the scholars of the 1920's and 1930's. The writers in this new school, influenced by the immediate past and by present conditions, see great values,

particularly for national security, in an industrial society. For the same reasons, they place a high premium on nationalism and think the Union was worth saving, even by war. As to Reconstruction, while admitting that it brought with it some evils, they believe that it was a natural postwar process and that, given the situation, the South was due a degree of punishment. The result of their investigations has been to put the Radicals, the champions of industrialism and nationalism, in a more favorable light. Mr. Korngold's life of Stevens is in the new departure. A defense of Stevens was in order; his career and his program needed to be placed in a fresh perspective. In some respects Mr. Korngold has said the right things, but in his eagerness to justify Stevens he has swung the pendulum too far over to the other side.

Fundamentally, the Radicals were a necessary part of the historical process involved in the Civil War and the Reconstruction. Despite their unlovely personal qualities and their narrow intolerance, they contributed a valuable and a vital service to the development of the modern American nation. They furnished the driving force that destroyed slavery and sustained the Union. They were the last-ditch Unionists, the men who would never give up the nation no matter how badly the war went. Lincoln, who opposed them and used them, understood them perfectly. He said, "They are utterly lawless—the unhandiest devils in the world to deal with—but after all their faces are set Zionwards."